

# Junior Wildlife Clubs

## *Now and For the Future*

By Patricia Stockdill

*In Barnes County, the Junior Naturalist Club meets once a month to learn about wildlife, habitat, and many forms of outdoor recreation.*

### Club Activities

Examples of junior wildlife or junior naturalist club activities conducted in Barnes County and through the Red River Area Sportsmen's Club, Wahpeton:

- BB gun shoot.
- Fishing derby.
- Archery and bowhunting basics.
- Trap shooting.
- Waterfowl identification and duck calling.
- Rifle shooting and deer hunting basics.
- Winter weather preparedness.
- Wildlife identification.
- Ice fishing derby.
- Backyard bird identification and bird watching.
- Nature hike.
- Pheasant hunting basics.
- Gun cleaning.
- Darkhouse spearfishing.
- Dog care.
- Boat and water safety.
- Plant identification.
- Boat fishing.
- Making pinecone bird feeders.
- Bluebird box construction.
- Wildlife videos.
- Outdoors cooking.
- Wetland discoveries.
- Trapping and wildlife management.
- Predator hunting.
- Calling wild turkeys.
- Lewis and Clark.
- Making fishing lures.

Ice fishing and open water fishing derbies and a youth waterfowl hunt held during the September youth waterfowl season are popular among children in both clubs. They are held in addition to regular monthly activities.



CRAIG BIRKLE

The message is splashed throughout the hunting and fishing community: "A kid hooked on fishing won't get hooked on drugs" or "Take a kid hunting and you won't have to hunt for your kid."

But there's more to involving children in the outdoors than keeping them on the straight and narrow.

A child introduced to outdoor activities is more likely to continue those activities into adulthood. Conversely, children who are not introduced to an activity during their formative years are less likely to partake in that activity as an adult.

The phrases may be designed to be catchy, but they pack a serious, far-reaching punch.

Most North Dakota wildlife clubs do a great job of involving kids by holding special events such as fishing or shooting outings. In addition, two North Dakota wildlife clubs have taken that concept a step further, establishing separate clubs for kids in addition to periodic special events. The Barnes County Wildlife Federation created a Junior Naturalist Club. The Red River Area Sportsmen's Club modeled their Junior Wildlife Club after Barnes County's program.

Lynda Knutsen, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service outdoor recreation planner, delved into her childhood experiences as a junior sportsmen's club member when she advanced the idea of a junior naturalist club

to the Barnes County organization. "That stuck out in my mind as a child," she said, "I really thought it was cool." Knutsen's club involvement was one of many outdoors experiences that influenced her choice of a career.

The Barnes County Wildlife Club, active in an array of wildlife, conservation and outdoors issues and activities, picked up on the idea. The junior club has been active about three years. The Wahpeton-based Red River Junior Wildlife Club began in May 2002.

Junior clubs are like any educational process – it all begins with children, said Doug Leier, North Dakota Game and Fish Department outreach biologist, West Fargo. Leier wishes he would have had the opportunity to participate in such a club when he was a kid.

The Barnes County Junior Naturalist Club grew out of interest in the annual Barnes County Youth National Wild Turkey Federation JAKES Day for children, Knutsen said. But the club recognized the need to expand activities beyond one-day, annual events. They also knew they had readily available resources in the area through the Game and Fish Department and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

After learning about the Barnes County Club, Wahpeton Parks and Recreation Department director Wayne Beyer and the

Red River Area Sportsmen's Club invited Knutsen and Leier to share their expertise. The club was already active in several youth events and a separate club could take activities to the next level.

The sportsmen's club has always worked closely with the Wahpeton Parks and Recreation Department, Beyer said, recognizing the importance of instilling lifelong activities at a young age. "The Junior Wildlife Club was really a continuum of what we do," he said.

Hunters and anglers go through various stages in their lives. At some point, passing on knowledge and sharing experiences collected in the outdoors outweighs hooking a big fish or taking a nice buck. Rather, satisfaction comes from sharing the joy they've been privileged to experience.

Katie, 14, has been involved in the Junior Wildlife Club with her 11-year-old brother, Derek, for about a year. She especially enjoys being outside, going to different places and learning new things. "It's just stuff you learn for life," she said.

The topics are different from what she learns in school. After all, how many school classrooms teach Dutch oven cooking?

Like Katie, from Wahpeton, 14-year-old Anthony of Valley City finds himself noticing things more when he's outdoors as a result of what he has learned in his club. He finds himself looking at things more closely. "I notice a lot more different animals and I can actually name them," he said.

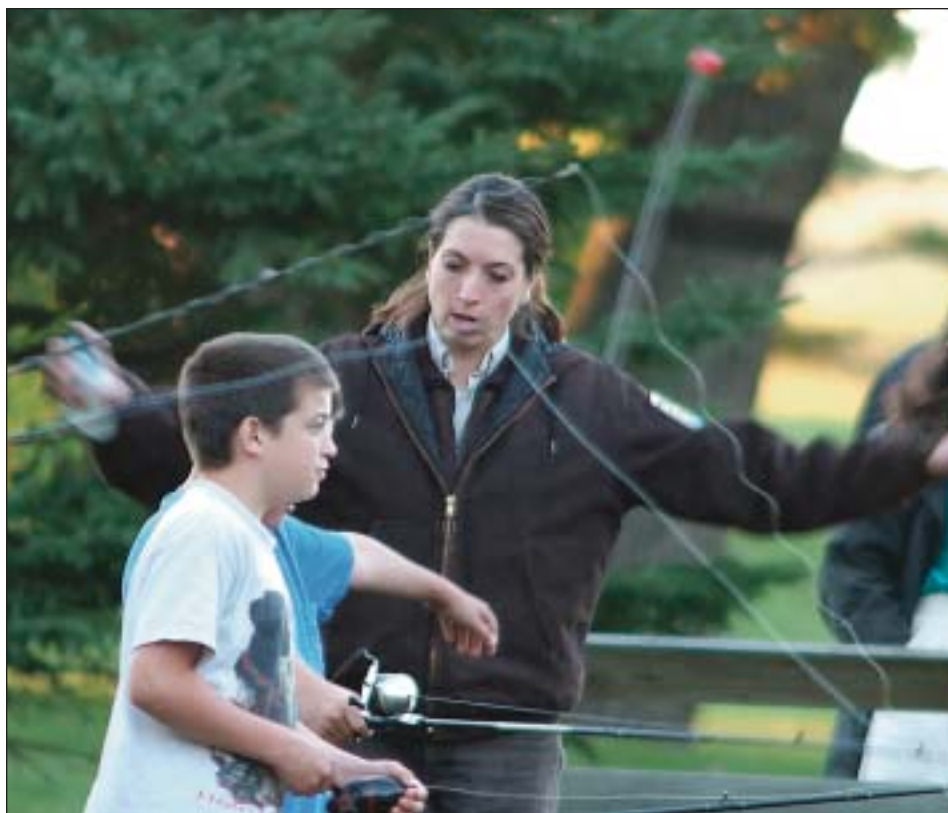
Katie and Anthony like the hands-on activities, the fun and different things that they do through the club.

Anthony's father, Gary, attends activities with him. "When we come home it gives us lots of opportunities to talk all of the way home," Gary said. Because parental involvement is so highly encouraged, the club provides another opportunity for Gary to be involved with Anthony's life and interests.

Knutsen and the Barnes County Wildlife Federation have done a wonderful job with the program, he said. "The biggest thing is that they make it fun," he said.

Gary's family has been involved for more than a year and likes the wildlife aspect of the club. "I'll be involved until they tell me I can't come back anymore," said Gary, who is amazed by the level of involvement in the club by Barnes County Wildlife Federation members.

*Lynda Knutsen is a catalyst and leader for the Barnes County Junior Naturalist Club.*



CRAIG BIHRLE



## ***Tips for organizing a junior wildlife or naturalist club:***

- Have as many hands-on activities as possible.
- Keep activities interesting and fresh.
- Let the children dictate the programs. The Wahpeton-based Red River Area Sportsmen's Club has a basic suggestion list of ideas they present during their annual spring picnic. But the children select topics and offer suggestions of their own, club member Wayne Beyer said. Some suggestions are not practical, however, such as learning to scuba dive, Barnes County Junior Naturalist Club spokeswoman Lynda Knutsen said.
- Providing snacks or food can make it easier for children to attend. With busy schedules for parents and children alike, serving things such as burgers, pizza, chicken or hot dogs helps everyone squeeze more things into a busy day.
- Be proactive and have good plans and good materials.
- Encourage parents and/or guardians to attend. Involve parents and guardians as much as possible.
- Do not limit participation to just one community or to children of adult club members. Remember, one goal should be to involve children who may not otherwise have an opportunity to participate in such activities. Beyer said their club philosophy is if children can get to the meeting, they're welcome.
- With busy schedules, it is difficult to select a night everyone can attend. Pick a standard time and date each month and stick with it unless special activities, such as a youth waterfowl hunt, are planned. Those could be in addition to regular monthly club activities.
- While it's difficult to limit the number of children, especially if the interest is there, remember that if groups are too large it may be difficult to provide as many hands-on opportunities.
- Involve club members, but don't expect one or two club members to do all the work.
- Seek outside funding and resources, tapping into the expertise of local wildlife managing agencies and non-club members with a special expertise in outdoor-related activities.
- Keep activities at 1 1/2 hours or less because many children have homework.
- Do not charge a club membership fee. Raise money to fund the junior club, if necessary, but make it as easy and accessible for children.
- The Barnes County Junior Naturalist Club is for students in grades three through six and older students can also attend. The Red River Junior Wildlife Club is for children ages 8 through 15.
- Use local media to promote the club, but the best promotion is word of mouth. "The kids who have fun ... are telling their friends about it," Beyer said.
- Provide a variety of activities ranging from environmental education, fishing, hunting, birding, hiking and so on.
- Involve as many outside resources as possible. The Red River Area Sportsmen's Club has partnered with a variety of organizations, including Scout troops, trap clubs, businesses, schools, hunters, anglers, their local zoo, North Dakota Game and Fish Department, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, rifle clubs, Ducks Unlimited, Pheasants Forever, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and others. The junior club provides an opportunity for a variety of organizations and entities to work together in areas where they may not otherwise, Beyer said.
- There is no need to re-invent the wheel. The Barnes County Wildlife Federation and Red River Valley Area Sportsmen's Club have found the secret to what works for them. If necessary, tweak their suggestions to find what works best for a particular area.

The junior club also provides the opportunity to get to know the local Game and Fish Department game warden. Children get to know law enforcement personnel, Gary said, so they learn to respect them and realize they are people to whom they can turn when in need, rather than fear or be intimidated.

Expansion of the program to other clubs and communities is something Gary would like to see. "It's a great deal," he said. "It's an excellent, excellent program."

While junior wildlife or naturalist clubs focus on fun, hands-on activities, they serve a much broader purpose. The concept, Knutsen said, is to get children interested in a variety of outdoor-related activities, as studies show that people involved in activities at a young age carry those interests over into adulthood.

Participants also learn to appreciate wildlife and habitat. They gain a conservation ethic.

And perhaps most of all, they learn that there is more to being involved in the outdoors than simply being out there, Knutsen said. It takes work by the public and professionals to have the outdoor recreational opportunities and resources that we enjoy in this country today, she said.

Hopefully, that understanding will be passed on, as well.

---

**PATRICIA STOCKDILL**, *Garrison*, is a freelance outdoor writer.

---

*Members of the Red River Area Sportsmen's Club at Wahpeton mentored these smiling young duck hunters during the youth waterfowl season in 2002.*



Ed Janzen, Fargo, joined the Junior Wildlife Club in Wahpeton to talk about the proper way to dress for spending time outdoors in winter. Janzen stressed a positive attitude toward winter cold, and among other things, offered this piece of advice about relying on blue jeans as protective, cold weather clothing: "They're not only not good, they're terrible. They get wet, they freeze, and they stay wet."



CRAIG BIRHLE

## Reaching Youngsters

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department has long touted the value of wildlife or conservation organizations.

The Department advocated grassroots wildlife and conservation clubs as far back as the early 1930s, during a time when money and wildlife were both prized and scarce.

A February 1932 *North Dakota OUTDOORS* article announced a drive to increase local conservation organization membership was about to be undertaken and that it had the full support of the Game and Fish Commissioner. A similar effort to form wildlife associations or "leagues" was advanced in 1935, and the Department offered to send out bylaw copies to assist fledgling organizations.

A May 1942 *North Dakota OUTDOORS* article praised the role of organized groups in the conservation movement. But all of the efforts focused on adults.

The Barnes County Junior Naturalist Club and the Red River Junior Wildlife Club reach far beyond the immediacy of adult clubs and look to the future by involving children, said Doug Leier, Game and Fish Department outreach biologist, Fargo.

The clubs have the capability to do something that agencies cannot accomplish alone, he said. Just as the Department is unable to reach hunter education students without the valued assistance of volunteers, Game and Fish cannot organize youth clubs without grassroots-level efforts. "Sometimes those of us in natural resources, with all of our good intentions, may be too focused on details," Leier said. "This is really hitting a home run."

What the Department can do, though, is provide resources to assist adult organizations in sponsoring youth clubs. "I think we owe that to the clubs," Leier said. Resources could include props, teaching aids, expertise and equipment.

Organizations interested in establishing youth clubs are invited to contact the Barnes County and Red River clubs. Wayne Beyer, Wahpeton Parks and Recreation Department, welcomes any questions by calling 701-642-2811. "There's definitely a template of success, they've done it," Leier said.

It takes a special group of dedicated adults, such as those involved with the Barnes County and Red River clubs, with a willingness to put time, effort and money into a youth program to make it successful.

Success is measured in many ways, Leier said. What works and is successful for one club may not be deemed successful for another. Nor is success going to be measured overnight.

The short-term benefits may be something as simple as a fun way for a child to spend an evening. Or it may mean introducing an activity to a kid who may not otherwise have the opportunity.

And if a junior wildlife or naturalist club can teach respect for wildlife and conservation, spark an interest in the outdoors – be it in hunting, fishing or birding or hiking – or perhaps a career in natural resources, then all of the time, money and effort are worth it, Leier said.

Short- or long-term, the rewards will last for generations to come.



Randy Bostrum, an active member of the Barnes County Wildlife Federation, also extends his involvement by helping out at Junior Naturalist Club meetings.

CRAIG BIRHLE